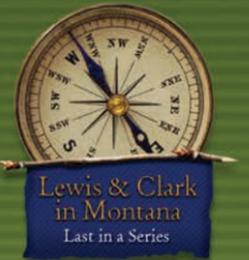


# STILL SCENES OF VISIONARY ENCHANTMENT



MUCH OF THE  
LEWIS AND CLARK TRAIL  
REMAINS REMARKABLY  
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CORPS OF DISCOVERY PASSED  
THIS WAY 200 YEARS AGO

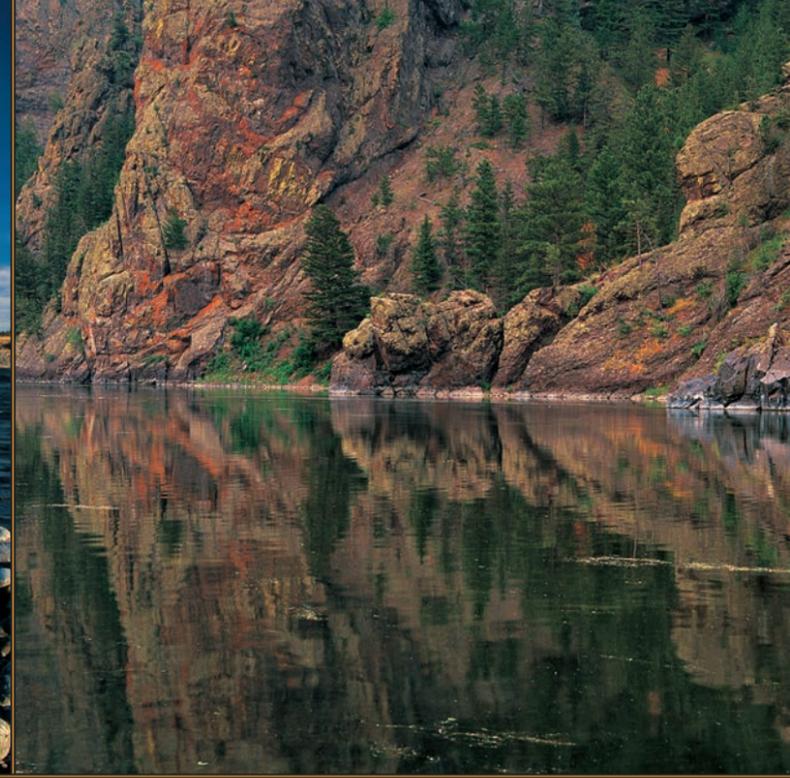


THE CORPS OF DISCOVERY, writes author Dayton Duncan in *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*, “saw the West as it was before the rest of their nation followed them across the continent—and changed it forever.” The region could not help but change as Easterners began streaming west to settle the new territory. Two centuries after the Lewis and Clark Expedition, nearly 100 million people now live on this side of the Mississippi River. Expansive prairies that crew member John Ordway wrote stretched “as far as our eyes could behold” are now efficient fields of wheat, barley, and sugar beets. Great herds of bison, which Ordway described as so abundant that at times “some of the party clubbed them out of their way,” have been replaced by vast herds of cattle. And the majestic Missouri River, which carried the expedition along so much of its journey, has been tamed from its former wild self into a series of flood-control lakes.

Yet, remarkably, much of the Lewis and Clark Trail remains the same—especially in Montana. The state is still home to the grizzly bears and

PHOTOS BY RICHARD MACK  
ESSAY BY TOM DICKSON

The Missouri River headwaters, where the Madison, Jefferson, and Gallatin rivers meet at Three Forks. Lewis and Clark passed through here July 24–28, 1805.



Facing page: The White Cliffs of the Missouri River. Clockwise from top left: the lower Yellowstone River; the Missouri River near Hardy; approaching Lemhi Pass from the east; the Big Hole River Valley. Below right: milkweed along the Missouri River near Great Falls.

bighorn sheep that fascinated the explorers. In recent decades pronghorn, elk, and deer herds have grown in some areas to sizes approaching what the corps members described. No one harvests trout by the bucketful these days, but anglers still hook plenty of westlope cutthroats, mountain whitefish, and other native fish that kept the corps fed and amused. Though the

tall crags are partially impounded by Holter Reservoir, visitors can still view the “dark and gloomy” Gates of the Mountains, which Lewis called “the most remarkable cliffs that we have yet seen.” Perhaps most unchanged are the White Cliffs of the Missouri. The pale sandstone formations and dark capstones were “seens of visionary enchantment” that reminded





Above: The view from Pompeys Pillar on the Yellowstone River near Billings. Below right: Clark's signature carved in the sandstone of Pompeys Pillar, the only remaining visible evidence of the expedition's passage.



Photographs by Richard Mack The Lewis & Clark Trail

Color images from *The Lewis & Clark Trail: American Landscapes*, by Richard Mack, published by Quiet Light Publishing. Mack is a commercial photographer in Evanston, Illinois. Tom Dickson is editor of *Montana Outdoors*.

Lewis of an ancient city and continue to mesmerize boaters floating past.

Of course Montana's geology and weather remain as they have for millennia. The east is still flat and the west still mountainous. As it always has, the Yellowstone muddies up each June and runs low and clear in September, and it's still difficult to cross the

Bitterroot Range on foot. Toe-numbing winters, ovenlike summers, swarms of "mosquitos," prickly pear cacti, and that inexhaustible wind are no different from what Lewis and Clark endured.

Though the elements shape landscapes over eons, people are what alter rivers, forests, and prairies in the short term. So much of Montana remains un-

changed because so much of it remains unpopulated. Several counties house fewer than one person per square mile, and a single area codes serves the entire 550-mile-long state.

One reason for Montana's low human density is the eastern region's lack of precipitation. Where rain does not fall, crop yield is low and communities struggle to





Above: The Yellowstone River west of Miles City. Below: Beaverhead Rock, near Dillon.

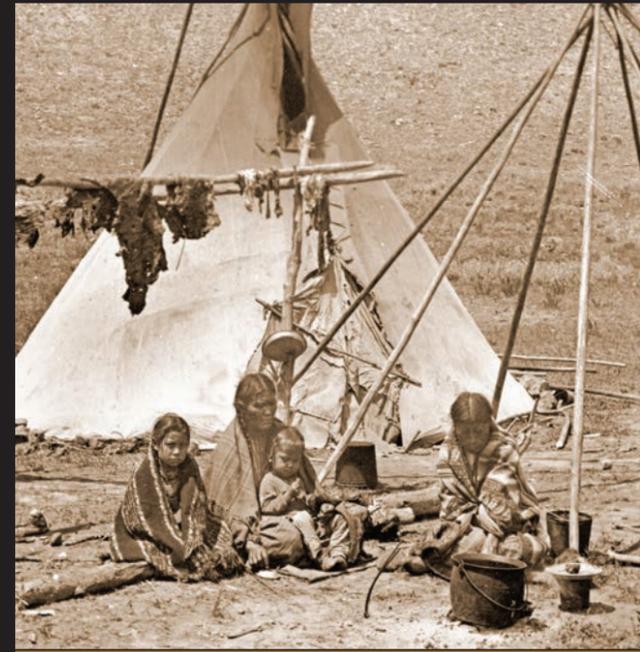


survive. If not for irrigation, even more of Montana would resemble what crew member Patrick Gass described as “the most open country I ever beheld, almost one continued prairie.”

It has taken more than dry skies to preserve Montana’s many natural splendors, however. President Theodore Roosevelt kick-started the conservation

movement here and across the United States by setting aside vast tracts of national forests (today Montana has 16.8 million acres). Conservation leaders later fought to establish national wild and scenic river designation (Montana has 368 miles on four rivers) and wilderness areas (3.4 million acres). Hunters worked with conservation agencies to restore

NO LONGER AS THEY WERE Clockwise, from top left: The expedition’s arrival marked the beginning of the end of Indians’ traditional way of life (L.A. Huffman, 1896). Though wolves are making a comeback, they will never congregate in “vast assemblages,” as Lewis described them while near Augusta (photographer and date unknown). Bison, which once roamed freely across the Great Plains, are now confined to parks and ranches (photographer and date unknown). The Great Falls of the Missouri River, a major milestone in Lewis and Clark’s journey, are now flooded beneath a series of impoundments (photographer and date unknown). Photos courtesy of the Montana Historical Society, Helena.



big game, upland bird, and waterfowl populations. Anglers marshalled forces to prevent dams from impounding the Yellowstone River and ensure that flows in all state waters remain adequate for fish survival.

Perhaps the most impressive sight on the Lewis and Clark Trail is the smallest one. Captain William Clark’s signature at Pompeys Pillar is the only enduring

physical evidence along the expedition’s entire 8,000-mile-long route to the Pacific Ocean and back. That famous script, carved deeply into limestone, shows how easily and lastingly people can alter their surroundings. Yet the site’s preservation as a national monument demonstrates that just as we can change the natural world, so can we protect it, too. 🐾